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AUTHOR Smith, Lydia A. H.
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ABSTRACT

In 1967, the paths of educational reform in the United States and in England unexpectedly crossed with the publication of the Plowden Report in England and articles by Joseph Featherstone and Edward Yeoman in the United States. The years 1967-1974 marked important period in the development of American education, important in the professional lives of teachers and administrators in elementary schools. The way in which the experiments in "open education" in England influenced educational thinking in the United States is examined. The European and American tradition of progressive education is outlined with reference to Rousseau, Froebel, Addams, and Dewey, and it is shown in this context that the rise of progressive education in America was not solely due to the British influence, but had a long tradition in American educational thinking. A history of the new beginning of progressive thought in education is given, and some of the effects on American education and schools are described. Six sections are as follows: introduction; personal impressions of English open education (1972); history of progressive education in Europe; history of progressive education in America; the effects of the British experience on "open education" in America; and conclusions. Contains 16 references. (Author/SM)

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"OPEN EDUCATION" REVISITED -

Americans Discover English Informal Education, 1967 - 1974

by Lydia A. H. Smith

1988 - 1989
World Education Monograph Series
Number One

THE I.N. THUT WORLD EDUCATION CENTER
Centro de Educacion Mundial I.N. Thut
Box U-93, School of Education
The University of Connecticut
Storrs, Connecticut 06269-2093
(203) 486-4815

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Abstract

This paper examines the way in which the experiments in "Open Education" in England influenced educational thinking in the United States. The European and American tradition of progressive education is outlined with reference to Rousseau, Froebel, Addams, and Dewey, and it is shown in this context that the rise of progressive education in America was not solely due to the British influence, but had a long tradition in American educational thinking. A history of the new beginning of progressive thought in education is given and some of the effects on American education and schools are described.

I. Introduction

In 1967, the paths of educational reform in the United States and in England unexpectedly crossed. In England, the Plowden Report Children and their Primary Schools described the best contemporary practice of English primary schools, and noted that "about a third" of them were basing their work on the activities and interests of children, not on pre-planned, fixed curricula. In the United States, Joseph Featherstone's three articles in The New Republic were published, describing his and his wife's visit to the Leicestershire schools in enthusiastic detail, and Edward Yeomans' Education for Initiative and Responsibility followed suit. Both of these American publications sold out rapidly, were reprinted, and the "word" spread among reform-minded educators at all levels. In 1968, some thirty articles were published that discussed what was going on in the English primary schools; by 1971, Barth and Rathbone's A Bibliography of Open Education listed more than three hundred articles, books, films, and informal publications of every kind. Americans travelled over to see for themselves the wonders they were reading about, and soon networks were established of colleagues who knew and visited each other, as in Leicestershire, the West Riding of Yorkshire, Bristol, Oxfordshire, Inner London; and in the U.S., Cambridge and Newton, Massachusetts, North Dakota, Philadelphia, Cleveland, New York City, San Francisco, and elsewhere.

Americans had "discovered" the English infant school and its child-centered methods, and for nearly a decade there was a vigorous exchange between English and American educators: they shared ideas and practices, visited each other's classrooms, wrote and made films about them, ran workshops, established seminars for practicing teachers, lectured, consulted, and demonstrated -- all in the optimistic hope that schools could be made better places for children to learn, and at the same time serve society better by redressing some of its inequities. In this, they were squarely within the progressive tradition in American educational history.

The pendulum has swung, as we all know, but what one educator called "that heady time" was an important period, in and of itself, important in the development of American

education, important as one aspect of the social and political currents of the time, and important in the professional lives of teachers and administrators in schools.

II. Personal Impressions of English Open Education (1972)

In 1972, I too made my pilgrimage, fascinated by the remarkable accounts of English informal schools, and wondering where their ideas and practices had come from. Surely, I thought, they could not have come about suddenly, although some were saying that informal methods were a relatively recent phenomenon and chiefly a result of the dislocations of World War II. I doubted that, for educational changes take a long time in any country, perhaps especially in a relatively conservative one like England. So I went to see what I could find out.

I did see wonders there. Children were working along individual lines on projects of their own choice, aided by teachers who served as guides, resources, and facilitators in school environments rich with materials and resources. Work was produced at a high standard and often of considerable beauty and maturity. The activity and experience of children were the starting points, but they were led to deepen interest into real knowledge and mastery of materials and concepts. "The basics" were thoroughly taught, but always as means toward the end of greater knowledge and understanding. I observed schools and talked with teachers, heads of schools, advisers, inspectors -- some of great age -- who had been working along child centered lines for all of their professional lives. They, in turn, had been taught to do so as beginning teachers by their own head teachers. I could see that such work had been going on in villages and in cities, since well before the turn of the century. Moreover, these were not private, independent schools charging a high tuition for the luxury of progressive ideas and practices; these were just neighborhood, tax-supported, ordinary schools. And they had been slowly, gradually developing their methods over a long period of time, aided by advisers who spread news of good practices from one school to another, teacher centers and their regular courses in child study, curriculum areas, and other topics, post-graduate courses for experienced teachers,

lectures and weekend workshops -- it grew mostly by personal contact among like-minded educators, and by the hard work of actual trial and error with real children and in real schools, not by theory, although when theory was gradually developed, it was welcomed by practitioners who understood and could use it.

So when Americans discovered the English primary school "revolution," as it was called, it was in fact less a revolution than a long, slow evolution.

III. History of Progressive Education in Europe

However, one can go even further back than the turn of the century, and one should. Educational philosophy which centers on the growing child has a long history, and by now it has branched out to include all areas of child study. But it has never been center stage, in the mainstream of educational practice, for there has always been strong opposition to freer, less restrictive child-rearing practices in general and teaching methods in particular. We see this difference today with striking clarity, and it has been going on for a long time. As one author puts it:

> "As at the present time, the gulf, in history, lay broadly between those who believed that education is a matter of training the intellect only, of learning from books, and of discipline imposed from without, and those who believe it to be an inner force, a growth from within; that the germ of development lies in the soul and that, given the right conditions, it must develop. Education then becomes a matter of nurturing, and of providing the right environment. It concerns not the intellect alone, but the whole man, his feelings, his creative powers, his imagination, and his soul." And she continues: "The story of education is not a simple one. It ebbs and flows. Times of enlightenment, often most remarkably modern in their thought and practice, alternate with long periods of dark conformity and sterility. There is a constant breaking off and starting again. The influence of progressive thinkers was not continuous. Most experiments, successful in

themselves, had little influence on other writers and practitioners. But a thread, nevertheless, runs through; a spark grows, glows, and then fades away; the same theme appears, disappears, and reappears in differing forms from age to age, and slowly the light grows steadier." (Elizabeth S. Lawrence. The Origins and Growth of Modern Education. Baltimore, 1970, p.11-12)

Of course, it was Rousseau who established the importance of childhood, to be valued as a special period of life, with special needs and characteristics, very different from adulthood with all its conventions and prejudices. "Nature requires children to be children before they are men. ... Childhood hath its manner of seeing, perceiving, and thinking, peculiar to itself," he wrote, "You will never accomplish your design of forming sensible men, unless you begin by making playful children." (Robert Ulrich. Three Thousand Years of Educational Wisdom. Cambridge, Ma, 1947, p. 397 and 405) And, although Rousseau's understanding of children and their natural development was profound and had a far-reaching effect, it was also part of his political agenda to rid human society of absolutism and authoritarianism, and to lead a re-created mankind to true freedom and independence. His Emile cannot be read separate from his Social Contract, any more than we can think about the period of American interest in English informal education separate from the social and political events of the time.

Followers of Rousseau's notions about childhood established their own schools -- none outlasted its founder, but at least Pestalozzi's school at Yverdun in Switzerland provided some training for an educator who was destined to have a profound influence on European, English, and American education -- Friedrich Froebel. One hundred and fifty years ago, he opened a little school for children which he called a "kindergarten." One hundred years ago, his The Education of Man was first translated for the American public, with an enthusiastic introduction written in the very home of Transcendentalism -- Concord, Massachusetts -- by William Torrey Harris. Froebel's word for his school has found a permanent place in our language, as has the kindergarten itself in our public school systems. And it was Harris himself, while superintendent of schools in St. Louis, who learned about

kindergarten methods from Elizabeth Palmer Peabody of Boston, and made the kindergarten an official part of the public school system there.

Today, Froebel's insights into the true nature of children, the value of play in their development, and the importance of careful training of the teachers of young children are almost taken for granted, especially in some of the recent studies which demonstrate the great importance of early childhood education.

Froebel's kindergarten is well-known; his work leading up to it is less so. In 1817, having spent two years with Pestalozzi, he was asked to undertake the education of three nephews, and later two more. Eventually, he and two associates established a remarkable social experiment at Keilhau, which at one point numbered some sixty people, living and learning together as an extended family. As the head of this community, Froebel was able to put into practice his educational ideas, and in 1826, he published The Education of Man, his most serious attempt to set out his philosophy in extended form. His community received much attention and interest: inspectors came to visit and observe, and wrote glowing accounts of the life of its members, young and old. Here is a brief quotation from a Prussian Government Superintendent named Zech:

> "I found here what is never seen in actual practical life, a thoroughly and intimately united family of at least sixty members, living in quiet harmony, all showing that they gladly perform the duties of their very different positions; a family held together by the strong ties of mutual confidence, and in which, consequently, every member seeks the interest of the whole, where all things thrive in joy and love, apparently without effort. (Froebel, Friedrich W. A. The Education of Man. New York, 1901, Translator's Preface, p. xiii)
>
> "... My experience was the same as that of all impartial examiners of the institution. ... This object (of the school) is by no means mere knowledge, but the free, self-active development of the mind from within. Nothing is added from without except to enlighten the mind, to strengthen the pupil's power, and to add to

his joy by enhancing his consciousness of growing power." (ibdi, p. xvi)

Although the community at Keilhau did not last beyond 1831, by 1837 Froebel was able to return there and to open his "kindergarten", a name he chose with great care. There he began work out his series of toys or teaching materials, which were called "gifts" and "occupations," each designed not only to engage children's interest and enjoyment but also to develop dexterity of movement and to teach their minds something of the eternal laws of nature. For example, the first "gift" was a soft woollen ball, which was not only pleasing to handle but embodied in its shape the wholeness and harmony of the God's created universe.

Much of the rest of the Froebelian story is well-known also: the establishment of other kindergartens in Europe, complete with training for teachers of young children from the very start; the beginnings of dedicated followers, with the Baroness von Marenholtz-Bulow chief among them; and the subsequent establishment of kindergartens in England especially, where Froebel's followers fled after the failure of the revolution in Germany in 1848. England proved to be especially fertile soil for the spread of the kindergarten movement. The infant school had been in existence there since at least 1816, and there was an established belief that the youngest children needed a special approach in education: they should be encouraged to play, to sing and dance, to take an interest in natural objects, and to understand the meaning of stories before they learned to read in a formal way. Therefore, in England, kindergartens and their methods became the central focus of educators who were concerned about the lives of young children. A network of teacher training colleges was founded to prepare teachers in Froebel's ideas and practices. The National Froebel Society was established, beginning in 1873, and for years it published research and accounts of good practice in the education of young children, became the officially accepted accrediting body for teacher training programs, sponsored teachers' workshops, post-graduate courses, and in-service programs of every kind, and was considered to be the organization which spoke for early childhood education in official government reports, of which there was a long and widely-respected series, beginning in 1905, and continuing in 1918,

1931, 1959, and finally in 1967 -- all clearly influenced by the Froebelians' views about children. So when I asked my respondents for the source of their methods, it was no accident that I heard again and again, "Well, of course, I was Froebel-trained."

Froebel was not, of course, the only important influence on English educational thought and practice: far from it. The English are eclectic in their adoption of ideas, and, as I say, England was already to some extent prepared for his views. Others were incorporated along the way, as they seemed to show promise of improving teaching methods, such as Freud, Dewey, Montessori (to some extent), and Piaget, but not, however, the work of the behaviorists. They were primarily an American phenomenon. In England, especially in the period between the wars, when progressive ideas were much in vogue, there was substantial efforts to study child growth and development, and to improve schools and teaching as well as child-rearing practices along what had become established child-centered lines. With the work of Susan and Nathan Isaacs, Sir Percy Nunn, Cyril Burt, and many others, a solid theoretical base for "modern" education was established as well as its vital connection to social progress and harmony.

IV. History of Progressive Education in America

In this same period, progressive ideas in general and progressive education in particular were also moving ahead in the United States as well. To quote from Cremin's famous book,

> "... progressive education began as part of a vast humanitarian effort to apply the promise of American life --the ideal of government by, of, and for the people -- to the puzzling new urban-industrial civilization that came into being during the latter half of the nineteenth century. ... progressive education began as Progressivism in education: a many-sided effort to use the schools to improve the lives of individuals." (Lawrence A. Cremin. The Transformation of the School; Progressivism in American Education. New York, 1961, p. viii)

It was, of course, John Dewey who expressed most fully and systematically what the relationship between the school and society could be. Beginning with the founding of the Laboratory School in Chicago in 1896 and continuing throughout a long lifetime of writing and teaching, his was the major voice in progressive education. And, by the way, I found my English friends knew their Dewey very well, not to mention Piaget -- long before Americans took either one seriously. With Dewey, progressivism brought together several important tendencies -- such as "a romantic emphasis upon the needs and interests of the child, in the tradition of Rousseau, Pestalozzi, and Froebel - now colored and given scientific authority by the new psychology of learning and behavior. ... the democratic faith in the instrument of the common, or public school, inherited from Jefferson and Mann - but now applied to the problems of training the urban and rural citizenry for industrial and agricultural vocations, and of acculturating or Americanizing the swelling masses of immigrants." (Dworkin, Martin S. Dewey on Education. Selections with an Introduction and Notes by Martin S. Dworkin. New York, 1959, p. 9)

In 1889, Jane Addams (for whom, by the way, John Dewey named his daughter) founded Hull House in Chicago, with its visionary goal of humanizing an industrial civilization, using education in the broadest sense as its tool. The Bureau of Educational Experiments in New York City, later the Bank Street College of Education, was founded in 1916, and still holds a special place in research in child development and teacher education. During the winter of 1918-19, the platform of the new Progressive Education Association was planned, to provide "a focus to the then scattered and ununified attempts at educational reform going on in different parts of the country." (Lawrence A. Cremin. The Transformation of the School;... New York, 1961, p. 242) This platform contains some now-familiar planks:

"1. The Freedom to Develop Naturally

The conduct of the pupil should be self-governed according to the social needs of his community, rather than by arbitrary laws. This does not mean that Liberty should be allowed to become licence, or that the teacher should not exercise authority when it proves necessary. Full opportunity for initiative and self-expression should be provided,

together with an environment rich in interesting material that is available for the free use of every pupil.

2. Interest the Motive of All Work

Interest should be satisfied and developed through: (1) Direct and indirect contact with the world and its activities, and use of the experience thus gained. (2) Application of knowledge gained, and correlation between different subjects. (3) The consciousness of achievement.

3. The Teacher a Guide, Not a Task Manager

...

4. Scientific Study of Pupil Development

...

5. Greater Attention to All That Affects the Child's Physical Development

...

6. Co-operation Between School and Home to Meet the Needs of Child-Life

...

7. The Progressive School a Leader in Educational Movements

..." (ibid, p. 243 - 245)

By 1928, Dewey was able to report on the "common elements" which could be observed in progressive schools, as compared to more traditional ones:

"... a common emphasis upon respect for individuality and for increased freedom; a common disposition to build upon the nature and experience of the boys and girls that come to them, instead of imposing from without external subject-matter and standards. ... a certain atmosphere of informality, because experience has proved that formalization is hostile to genuine mental activity and to sincere emotional expression and growth. Emphasis upon activity as distinct from passivity ... . a common unusual attention to the human factors, to normal social relations, to communication and intercourse which is like in kind to that which is found in the great world beyond the school doors; that all alike believe that these normal human contacts of child with child and of child with teacher are of supreme educational importance,... . ... respect for individual capacities, interests, and experience; enough external freedom and informality at least to enable teachers to become acquainted with children as they really are; respect for self-initiated and self-conducted learning; respect for activity as the

stimulus and centre of learning; and perhaps above all belief in social contact, communication, and cooperation upon a normal human plane as all-enveloping medium." (Dworkin, Martin S. Dewey on Education ..., p. 115-116)

And let me give you a final quote from Dewey, which in part was used by Lawrence Cremin in an interview in Education Week, March 16, 1988:

> "... (we must) make each one of our schools an embryonic community life, active with types of occupations that reflect the life of the larger society, and permeated throughout with the spirit of art, history, and science. When the school introduces and trains each child of society into membership within such a little community, saturating him with the spirit of service, and providing him with the instruments of effective self-direction, we shall have the deepest and best guarantee of a larger society which is worthy, lovely, and harmonious." (ibid, p. 49)

V. The effects of the British experience on "Open Education" in America

These were at least some of the antecedents of the English informal schools which Americans "discovered" in and after 1967. But even that discovery had its roots. In 1957, the year of Sputnik, David Armington was involved in curriculum development, working with David and Frances Hawkins, especially in mathematics and science. He met Bill Hull and John Holt, among others, at the Shady Hill School in Cambridge. In 1961, Bill went to Leicestershire, to see the work in mathematics being done by Zed Dienes, using multibase blocks with children. He saw much more than that: he was completely unprepared for the extraordinary schools he saw. Classrooms of more than forty children, all working independently on math but also on art, writing, reading, and much more, along informal, flexible lines of organization. He came back and said to Ed Yeomans, then head of Shady Hill, "You have to see these schools!" In 1963, Tony Kallet also went to Leicestershire, and stayed seven years as a roving adviser and consultant, and writing to friends and colleagues in the U.S. about his experiences there. In 1966,

Vincent Rogers made his trip, to Oxfordshire, and, to quote him, "I have not been quite the same since." He edited an important book, Teaching in the British Primary School, bringing together some excellent essays by leading English teachers and advisors. From 1967 on, Ed Yeomans spent much time bringing English educators to the U.S. in the summers, for workshops and demonstrations, and other American educators who had by then visited the English infant schools also established their own connections and exchange visits.

And so the "word" spread, especially after the publications of 1967. But I have to emphasize again that while for some educators the work of English informal schools was a revelation, for others it was in fact a confirmation. There were people who had been involved in progressive education for a long time -- Frances Hawkins, for example, had gone to a thoroughly Froebelian kindergarten in San Francisco in 1917 and "never got over it" -- Vito Perrone was already working along progressive lines in North Dakota -- Patricia Carini had founded the Prospect School in Vermont in 1965, quite independent of any English influences -- for these and others, the work of the English schools seemed more of a logical extension of ideas and practices with which they were already thoroughly familiar, than a new revelation.

Nonetheless, for those less prepared, the English infant schools were remarkable indeed, and Americans by the hundreds flocked to them. The English received them with their usual courtesy and did their best to accommodate their requests to observe classes, while not disturbing the children unnecessarily. One of my correspondents reports that the first Americans who came knew a good deal about children and what they were observing; later ones came more as tourists: "Please, could I see an English infant school nearby this morning, as I want to shop at Harrod's this afternoon?"

Back in this country, several initiatives were undertaken, along quite different lines, in a serious attempt to bring "open" education to the U.S. By the way, that term is not English: they don't call their methods anything in particular, as I found when I tried various terms like "Leicestershire method," or "the integrated day," or "family grouping," or "experimental learning," or "the play way," or "activity-based," or "materials-rich environment," or even

"progressive." They use some or all of these terms from time to time: mostly, they just refer to "good schools." "Open" was strictly an architectural term, meaning the kind of space which was planned for "good" teaching and learning to be conducted.

So there were many attempts to transplant English methods to this country, and establish them in public and private schools alike. Thanks to some very substantial support from foundations like Ford, Rockefeller, and the New World Foundation, such attempts were made possible. Ed Yeomans also established the Greater Boston Teachers Center, to provide consultation and support during the school year for teachers as they were working out new ideas for themselves in their classrooms.

Meanwhile, there was a group of graduate students at the Harvard Graduate School of Education -- Charles Rathbone, Maurice Belanger, Roland Barth, among others -- who had been teachers, were now working for their doctorates, and were eager to bring their research and analysis to bear on the English infant schools and their methods. Several important publications resulted from their theses, and from their later work. For example, Charles Rathbone wrote about the principles which undergirded the best English practices: Roland Barth tried to transplant them to New Haven, with disastrous results, which he carefully chronicled, and then went on to much greater success as the principal of e Newton school.

New schools were built with "open space." One can still see the Fayerweather Street School in Cambridge, which was definitely planned for open education, as was the Ripley School addition in Concord, the Bancroft School in Andover, the Devotion School in Brookline, North Andover High School, as well as others around the country. In these schools, sometimes the teachers were involved in the planning and sometimes they were not: at Ripley School, for example, the building was planned by architects with no consultation with those who would use it. Philip Best of the Tower Hill School in Oxfordshire (which is a beautiful school) was brought over for a few weeks during the summer before it opened, and he worked hard to impart his methods to the group of American teachers who were assigned to the new building, but,

alas, this was not enough and the space was never used to its full advantage.

Of such attempts to transplant English ideas and practices to American schools, some more successful than others, the most successful ones were closely connected with people and institutions for whom progressive or "open" education was not new, and who could therefore work from long experience with children and from systematic reflection on their teaching. Some attempts were on a fairly large scale, while others began in just one classroom at a time. For example, the design of the Head Start program owed much to this new wave of interest in progressive ideas, and provided valuable educational experiences for many underprivileged children prior to their public school entry, and the later Follow Through plan continued along similar lines.

Curriculum development also moved ahead, with organizations like the Elementary Science Study group, later the Educational Development Corporation (EDC) and the Workshop for Open Education, among many others, trying to create curriculum materials for teachers who wanted new ways to do things and who therefore needed new materials to use with children.

In Cambridge, Bill Hull was holding a Seminar on Children's Thinking, meeting weekly in his home with practicing teachers, recording their reflections on their own teaching, typing up the notes from these meetings, and circulating them.

In Boulder, Colorado, David and Frances Hawkins set up the Mountain View Center for Environmental Education, sponsored by the Ford Foundation, at the University of Colorado, where he was professor of philosophy, and Tony Kallet joined them there. The magazine Outlook, started in 1970, came from that center, and has only recently gone out of publication.

In North Dakota, Vito Perrone was already working with teachers of that state along progressive lines, and also had brought together the North Dakota Study Group to discuss both practical and philosophical issues in education. The monographs of this group are still extremely interesting and valuable contributions to the documentation and analysis of

progressive educational ideas and practices, and the study Group holds a yearly conference for the group itself and others who want to continue the dialogue.

In Vermont, Pat Carini continued to work with children at the Prospect School, attracting much interest among educators, and then added a series of summer workshops for practicing teachers and the Prospect School Archive, a collection of children's work over several years' of attendance at the school.

Also in these years, there were several young men who went into teaching rather than go to Viet Nam, and their accounts of schools and teaching drew a considerable audience -- such as Kozol's Death at an Early Age, Kohl's 36 Children, Dennison's The Lives of Children, and many others.

Other publications of every kind, as I said, streamed forth, first in mimeographed form, handed from friend to friend, then articles, books, and films, in great variety and from many sources. People who were knowledgeable about informal education were in great demand to lecture all around the country, for parents and teachers seemed eager for something new, something optimistic and forward looking. Open education became a "buzz word" and was enthusiastically embraced on all sides, not always with full understanding of its difficulties or implications, and often for political as much as educational reasons.

VI. Conclusion

What is left of all this? By 1974, the wave of interest and reform had substantially passed, as the country itself moved away from the famous '60s, with all its turmoil and protest and revolt against social inequalities, authoritarian views and static, unresponsive institutions. Again, the pendulum has indeed swung toward a more conservative, narrower view of what is possible for schools, for teachers, and for children. This is true in both England and the U.S. For example, Mrs. Thatcher and her Minister of Education are pushing through Parliament a new education bill which will, as my correspondents tell me, turn the clock back in education fifty years or more. They are deeply depressed by the

educational climate there, and tell me that the morale among teachers is desperate.

My own work right now is in following up some of the actors who were on the stage during the period of peak interest in English informal schools -- and for the most part I'd have to say that, each in his or her own way, they are continuing the work. Progressive folks don't change their spots, I find, and they are now working in teacher education, the law, educational administration, music teaching, and even foundations. Certainly, in England, "good" teaching goes on, I am told, although with somewhat less fanfare than earlier -- and for that, some are quite thankful!

And, a final piece of good news: there is a small group of like-minded people who are beginning to put together an organization for the next wave of interest in progressive education which is surely around the corner. Four conferences have already been held, and a publication called Pathways has been established. This year, three meetings of the nucleus group have been held, to discuss common concerns and convictions, and to consider some useful projects to undertake, such as a modern version of the famous Eight-Year Study -- probably focusing on kindergarten through high school, and the transition to college. What might be possible, they are asking, if high schools were not constrained by college admissions requirements? What might they do? How might young people aged 14 - 18 most usefully spend their time? Of all that, more later perhaps.

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